

If ontology, then politics

The sophist effect

Andrew Goffey

To speak is to do something – something other than to express what one thinks, to translate what one knows, and something other than to play with the structure of language.

Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*

For a critical history of philosophy, the relationship between philosophy and politics has been foreclosed by a strategy apparent since Marx's remark in the *Theses on Feuerbach* that philosophers have only interpreted the world: the interminable search for a 'transcendental signified' which would supply a response to all our questions. This is a hopeless task which has as its result the occlusion of contingent points in history when the otherwise becomes possible. Recent reflections draw further attention to the problematic links between philosophy and the political, evident since Plato's advocacy of tyranny (to mention nothing of that of Heidegger). But they do so, perhaps, within the framework of too orthodox a history (and historiography).¹ The merit of the erudite and provocative work of Barbara Cassin is to have problematized the relationship between philosophy and the political in an entirely new fashion. The following article offers an introductory analysis of what she calls a 'sophist history of philosophy' in terms of her interest in thinking the political 'as such'.

It is through the deceptive simplicity of the idea of 'thinking the political as such' that the problematic nature of philosophical discourse becomes evident. For Cassin, this requires that the political not be subordinated to any more determining instance, and it is this negative condition which draws attention to the limits of philosophical reflection. Of course, an investigation of the conditions and limits of philosophical discourse is not, in itself, anything new: Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Marx, Nietzsche, to mention but a few, all found themselves faced with the problem. However, the originality of Cassin's work is to suggest that thinking the political, and questioning the limits

and conditions of philosophy, involve a return to those inimical but wholly necessary enemies of philosophy, the original non-philosophers: the sophists.

Cassin's 'sophist history of philosophy' is a detailed philosophical and philological examination of the relationship between philosophy and sophistry, primarily based on the first and second sophistic, those of Ancient Greece and Imperial Rome, but extending to the present day, through a consideration of the resonances of sophistry with the work of certain contemporary writers.² It suggests that the major obstacle to thinking the political is, in fact, philosophy; more specifically, ontology. For Cassin this implies the need to confront the Heideggerian interpretation of the Presocratics, on the assumption that it is the predominance of Heideggerian motifs in much continental – particularly French – philosophy which accounts for the absence of any serious consideration of sophistry.

Whilst it is certainly the case, as Deleuze and Guattari suggest in *What is Philosophy?* that it is difficult to be Heideggerian these days, it is also the case that the German master's philosophy forms, as Badiou has put it, a 'commonplace' of contemporary thought and a pervasive interpretation of philosophy's distant past. A persistent emphasis on 'authenticity' and on poetry qua *Dichtung* as privileged vector of experience, for example, provides a convenient and easily mobilized framework for deterring attempts to think the history of philosophy otherwise. One cannot shift responsibility for a contemporary reluctance or inability to rethink the history of philosophy entirely onto Heidegger, and Cassin's work gives us little reason so to do. But it remains the case that it is difficult to mention the word 'ontology' without recalling Heidegger's strictures about the meaning of Being.³

An alternative reading of the Presocratics and of metaphysics testifies to the existence of what Cassin

calls a ‘sophist effect’ and yields a discursive practice, with a very distinctive discursive action, she calls (after Novalis) ‘logology’. The constitution of logology suggests that sophistry is a discursive practice forming the transcendental condition of politics.

The term ‘sophist effect’⁴ primarily designates the manner in which sophistry puts philosophy ‘outside of itself’ by virtue of a practice of language that philosophical categories cannot assimilate, making sophistry philosophy’s ‘unsublatable’ other. Sophistry is simultaneously a historical *fact* (there have been, there are, there will be sophists, and verifiably so – Plato talks about them; Socrates was one, for a bit, debatably; some of their writings remain), and a structural *effect* of philosophical discourse (not only does Plato talk about them, some of his dialogues are structured around them; Aristotle endeavours to exclude them; and the invective ‘sophism’ is baldly evident in other philosophers – think, for example about Kant’s analysis of the antinomies of pure reason).

In this second sense, Cassin is suggesting not only that philosophy is constituted around the exclusion of the sophist, but that philosophical discourse – or better, that specific practice of language use which is philosophy – can *only* define itself in relation to sophistry, an other whose use of language is hence mistaken or unethical. The relationship of philosophy and sophistry is agonistic and immanent, and the philosopher includes a small dose of the play of language (= rhetoric) so as to inoculate against the destructive viruses of the sophist. But in so doing, a play of perpetual reversal becomes possible: the lost writings of Protagoras were not called ‘catastrophic discourses’ for nothing. Finally, sophistry is a philosophical *artefact*: historically constructed for the comforting of a particular use of language, most of our documentation concerning sophistry derives from philosophy itself.⁵

But why does sophistry put philosophy outside of itself, and what is the nature of the threat that it constitutes? To understand this, it is necessary to examine the nub of Cassin’s argument, which is an account of the sophist critique of Parmenidean ontology developed in the *Treatise on Non-Being or Nature*. But why should Cassin’s philological disputatiousness have contemporary relevance?

If Parmenides...

Parmenides is of strategic interest not only because his writing institutes the ontological problematic into which Plato and the subsequent history of philosophy fall, but more specifically because of the important role that his Poem plays for Heideggerian philosophy. To

put it crudely, Parmenides represents, for Heidegger, a ‘prelapsarian’ experience of Being – with Plato constituting the point at which Being becomes merely a topic for investigation – and thence a means of authenticating specific philosophies.⁶ In the words of Jean Beaufret, the interest of Parmenides lies not simply in the idea that Being is transcendent but the idea that Being forms a ‘founding transcendence’, the ground for the Heideggerian concept of ontological difference. Here is Beaufret:

if every great poem is an event, and perhaps even an adventure, the question of knowing what occurs, exactly, in the poem of Parmenides poses itself. We may formulate the response as follows. It is transcendence itself which occurs; not, of course in the metaphysical sense of a transcendent being which dominates from Platonism to the present day, but in the sense of a going beyond or of the radical transgression of every possible being towards the very illuminating of the Being of being.⁷

Parmenides is thus a source of the epochal sending of Being at the root of Dasein’s historicity, and grounds the view that the Presocratics held themselves in the pure light of the unveiling of Being, in its presencing, thus defining the very horizon of philosophical discourse.

How, then, does Cassin’s contestation of the famously ‘more Greek than the Greeks’ perception of Presocratic philosophy offer the grounds for thinking the political?

Early Greek philosophy develops a number of philosophical positions critical of ontology: the scepticism of Sextus Empiricus offers one particularly acute critique of the theory of being, and it is a criticism which has retained its force. However, within a post-Heideggerian framework, scepticism remains problematic, for, despite its capacity to place ontology in a state of indeterminacy (by neutralizing the ontological opposition of being and non-being), it presupposes a conception of truth of the ‘S is P’ kind. When applied to sophistry, via the doxographic work of Sextus Empiricus, scepticism results in a critique of ontology which derives from the impossibility of finding a subject for the verb ‘to be’ in Parmenides’ Poem.

That on the one hand nothing is, he [Gorgias] deduces in the following manner: if ‘is’ then either being or non-being is, or both being and non-being are. Now neither being, as he will establish, nor non-being, as he will maintain, nor being and non-being, as he will teach, are. Therefore, there is nothing that can be.⁸

Cassin, however, does not say that the sceptical version of sophistry is wrong exactly: it is a part of the history

of philosophy and so is implicated in the process of the domestication of sophistry, a regulating and ordering of language as performance.⁹ One must therefore look at Gorgias again.

Cassin's interpretation of the sophist Gorgias stresses that ontology is a discursive performance. This view is based partly on a close analysis of the writings of Gorgias, but also derives from a perception of the parallels between Homer's *Odyssey* as discursive performance and Parmenides' Poem. The latter, she suggests, is a palimpsest of the former, and both chart the adventure of language, in the sense that they thematize the linguistic mechanisms by which the hero/being is constituted (being in its participle form, *l'étant*, deriving from being in its infinitive form, *être*). In itself the claim for a parallel between the two texts is not new (one can find it in Guthrie, for example), but the idea that the Poem would be something like a philosophical allegory of Ulysses' journey is new and is supported (*pace* Adorno and Horkheimer) by the view that there is a parallel between Ulysses having to escape from the seductive sounds of the sirens (= art, for Adorno and Horkheimer), and the necessity of avoiding, in the Poem, the path of non-being (becoming, change, movement, and so on). Poetry is far less *Dichtung* and far more discursive construct and the *Odyssey* makes perceptible the machinations of language in philosophy.

...then Gorgias

a position which is so strong in relation to ontology and metaphysics in general that it could turn out to be philosophically unsurpassable.¹⁰

The critique of ontology mounted by Gorgias is a response to the formulation of the ontological problematic by Parmenides in his Poem. Through the revelation of a goddess the young Parmenides is enjoined to distinguish the path of Being (or 'Is' or 'Truth') from that of Non-being (or 'Isn't' or 'Opinion'), paths that will become, in the time-honoured tradition of Platonism, those of Being as essence, and appearance. For the Heideggerian, on the other hand, the distinction refers to the path of Being and that of beings (i.e. to the ontological difference as such).¹¹ The path of Being is eternal, immutable, immobile and so on – the sphere of the One – whilst the path of non-being, the route of the mortals, is that of time, change and corruptibility. The difference between the two clearly conditions the intelligible/sensible distinction. Furthermore, because the path of Being is One, Being and Thinking are one and the same. The imperative enveloped by ontology is to follow the path of Being.

The response of Gorgias to Parmenides is as brusque as it is paradoxical: he formulates three (hypo)theses *ex concessi*, as it were: (1) 'Isn't', (2) 'If Is, Isn't Knowable', and (3) 'If Is and Is Knowable, Isn't Communicable to Others'. Cassin compares the paradoxical logic of these defensive positions to the tale of the kettle related by Freud: someone complains that the kettle lent to a friend has been returned with a hole in it. The friend replies: I didn't borrow a kettle; it already had a hole in when I borrowed it; I returned it intact.¹² The key to Cassin's view of sophistry lies in her showing how these negations derive from the discursive logic of the Poem itself, as inevitable consequences.¹³ This leads to the unavoidable conclusion that unless Parmenides' Poem is an exception to the discursive rule which it institutes, then it must be a logical text. *If Parmenides, then Gorgias*.

(1) The first thesis, 'Isn't', results from the very attempt Parmenides undertakes to distinguish between being and non-being. 'The only roads of enquiry there are to be thought of: one, that it is and cannot not be [*n'est pas ne pas être*], is the path of persuasion (for truth accompanies it); another, that it is not and must not be [*n'est pas et est besoin de ne pas être*] – this I say to you is a trail devoid of all knowledge.'¹⁴ The critique of Gorgias focuses on the use of the verbal infinitive: 'he says that neither to be is [or can be] nor not to be. For if not to be is not to be, non-being would be no less than being, for non-being is non-being and being being, such that things are no less than they are not.'¹⁵ In other words, by distinguishing the path of the Is from that of the Isn't, by means of the infinitive, one ends up producing entities one pretends don't exist. As soon as one says 'not to be is not to be' one produces two entities: one which exists and one which doesn't, because to say that 'not to be' is not to be implies that 'not to be' is (the argument is more obvious in French, which translates the Greek as *le non-être est non-être*). What is good for non-being is good for being: no longer one entity but two. What is more, the production of non-being makes evident the equivocation concealed in the ontological phrase between the 'copulative' and 'existential' values of the verb 'to be'.

(2) Accepting that Parmenides successfully distinguishes Is and Isn't – that is, that he can legitimately state that 'Is is' and 'Isn't isn't', however, produces similarly disastrous consequences – whence the second thesis. By virtue of the distinction of being and non-being, and by virtue of the identity of being and thinking, it follows that one need only say something in order for it to be, such that whether what I say is

true or false, it exists, it is, such that true and false become indiscernible: ‘demonstrations say everything without exception’.¹⁶ In these conditions, how can one know whether the path one is engaged upon is the right one? Being is unknowable not because it is not an object for thought (sceptical position), but because ontology makes things be in such a manner as to render it unknowable.

(3) The poetic revelation to Parmenides of the One route of being could be construed as evidence for the resoluteness of an experience of Being as such. It could also be interpreted as the occlusion of a subject, and hence of a speculative form of negation, necessary to preserve the consistency of the spherical plenitude of Being. For Gorgias it is neither of these things. Accepting that the ontologist has successfully distinguished being and non-being, and then shown that being is knowable, it remains that it cannot be communicated to others, by virtue of the categorical distinction between logos and the ‘noisy habits of mortals’. Parmenides is a mortal; mortals lie on the path of the ‘Isn’t’ and hear only ‘the noisy habits of mortals’ – utter ‘a logos’ and the addressee will hear only sounds. The very distinction of the divine logos and the doxa of the mortals (the ear hears sounds, the eye sees colours, and whoever speaks says only words) itself produces incommunicability: poetic revelation is a get-out clause attempting to preserve the consistency of ontology.



It is difficult, then, to maintain a view of Parmenides as holding fast in an experience of transcendence: Being as such is the effect of an exceptional use of language, an exception which the sophist aims at unveiling as pure machination, as a discursive violence. But does a negative critique of the ontological problematic which Parmenides inaugurates offer sufficient grounds for construing an entity such as that of logology? Cassin is well aware of the problem and deals with it through a detailed analysis of other remaining sophist texts, an analysis we will look at shortly. However, the critique of ontology serves Cassin as a guiding thread in examining a number of key texts in the ulterior philosophical tradition, thus obviating a further objection to her problematic: that removing ontology as obstacle to thinking the political as such doesn’t preclude the possibility of having recourse to other categories of thought, such as that of ethics.

Aristotle’s refutation of talking plants

Despite our prejudices to the contrary, sophistry is actually axiologically neutral, and it is the philosophical gesture of constituting rhetoric, for example, which occludes the political with the ethical. In other words, it is precisely the absence of reference to (the) good and evil¹⁷ which enables us to grasp the political. The predominant perception we have of sophistry – one in which the sophist is perceived to be acting in bad faith, manipulating our words, producing specious arguments, an ‘ironic imitator’ as Plato would have it, or (for Heidegger) having an inauthentic relation to language – is a philosophical artefact. Cassin devotes a large section of *L’effet sophistique* to analysing Plato’s attempts to distinguish between philosophy and sophistry in terms of good rhetoric and bad rhetoric, and the problems with it.¹⁸ However, rather than discuss this aspect of Cassin’s work, I would like to look at a more efficacious endeavour to constitute an ethical containment of sophistry, Aristotle’s demonstration by refutation of the Principle of Non-Contradiction (PNC) in Book Gamma of his *Metaphysics*. That Cassin herself has devoted a whole book to this subject is evidence of the importance it has in her attempts to rethink the history of philosophy starting from sophistry. It is also evidence of the philosophical difficulties there are in trying to grasp the discursive action constitutive of sophistry. Cassin’s account of the role of the principle for Aristotle shows that it successfully, but antagonistically, succeeds in doing what Plato was unable to do in his attempts at developing philosophical discourse: it tames the sophist. Indeed, one of the great virtues of Cassin’s reading of Greek

philosophy is to see, in the rather puzzling attempt by Aristotle to demonstrate the PNC, a battle with sophistry.¹⁹

The necessity for Aristotle of his demonstration by refutation can be clarified by referring back to the second of the three theses of Gorgias: 'If it Is, it is Unknowable.' As was seen earlier, it is unknowable by virtue of its integral knowability, the identity of being and thinking. Gorgias concludes from this identity that simply by the fact of saying something, it commences, for that very reason, to be. Cassin notes that this problematic conclusion animates Plato's *The Sophist*, wherein the Stranger accepts the view that in order to distinguish the true from the false, one must accept, in some measure, that non-being is. The question of course is, in what sense non-being is to be. Cassin argues that only Aristotle succeeds in avoiding the sophist consequences of Parmenidean ontology, and this by introducing a distinction between *saying something (about something)* and *signifying something (for both oneself and another)*, a distinction which anticipates that made between sense and reference. By specifying that in speaking one signifies something, it becomes possible for an utterance to have a sense, without necessarily having a referent, and it is in this sense, and this sense only, that non-being can 'be'. Non-being is a possibility *de dicto* and not *de re*. It is, of course, the idea that by speaking one signifies something for oneself and another which serves to prove, by refutation of the sophist, the all-important principle of non-contradiction:

Certain people claim a demonstration even for this principle, but through ignorance.... It is absolutely impossible to demonstrate everything: one would regress to infinity, in such a way that there could be no demonstration.... However, it is possible to establish [the principle of non-contradiction] by refutation, provided that the adversary simply say something. If he says nothing, *it is ridiculous to seek to have a discussion with someone who says nothing: such a man, would, as such, be like a plant.* (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book Gamma, 1006a)

Zoon logon echon: Aristotle's definition of the human, as rational animal or an animal that speaks (little matter the difference here), ensures that if one does not speak in accordance with the principle that one can signify only one thing at a time, for oneself and another, then one is not a human. Both Habermas and Apel see in this the basis for an ethics of dialogue or communication: the logical quality of signification characteristic of language ensures that one is always making a truth claim in what one says, whether one

is aware of it or not. More importantly, the defensive reaction to sophistry yields what Cassin calls the '2 positions of sophistry'. In fact, it produces three positions: discourse in which there is both sense and reference (philosophy); discourse in which there is sense but no reference (fiction: I have seen a unicorn); sounds or signifiers without any sense: the homonymic nonsense which only talking plants can produce. Much of *L'effet sophistique* is given over to an analysis of how Aristotle, and subsequent philosophy, will endeavour to police the boundaries resulting from the latter's concept of signification. The important point, however, lies in the generation of an illicit or impossible remainder of language in the very attempt at taming the sophist and warding off the catastrophic effects of its treatment of ontology.²⁰ Aristotle, Apel, Habermas: sense, consensus, exclusion.

There are a number of points to note about Aristotle's 'transcendental refutation'. First, the fact that the other whom Aristotle has in mind is the sophist offers clear evidence for the view that sophistry is a structural effect of philosophy and that what forms the latter's principle of principles can only be grounded through an attack on sophistry. (It is worth noting in passing that the Aristotelian procedure of refutation borrows a sophist gesture, that of the critical repetition). Second, one must note the, as it were, normative guarantee of what Aristotle says: it is his definition of humanity which takes charge of the universality of the principle, in the sense that if you do not speak like a human (i.e. in an implicitly or explicitly non-contradictory fashion) you are not a human. Third, the fact that the adversary needn't actually be aware of the validity of the principle in order for it to be demonstrated suggests that it has a transcendental value. Finally, and this is one of the key implications which one may draw from Cassin's discussion, established in this way, the PNC enacts a form of transcendental exclusion – form a conception of politics on this basis and the resulting consensus you seek will of necessity be exclusive: your city will contain outsiders, marginals, deviants, and other recalcitrants, and although you may feel reassured that your politics is ethically grounded in reason, sooner or later your consensus will form the basis of a tyranny.

The Aristotelian decision of sense renders sophistry treatable by philosophy, because it forces a particular perception of language onto the sophist, implying that s/he illicitly exploits the homonymical qualities of language. Philosophy will henceforth deal with sophistry in terms of a strategy of disambiguation,²¹ and Aristotle's categories will regulate the different

senses in which being can be said. For Cassin it is this 'decision', and the associated development of an autonomous plane of signification, which renders inaudible what she sees as being the really crucial aspect of sophistry: its relation to the political.

The infinitive of the political: to citizen

The appearance of politics as such, as a specific instance not subordinated to any more determining instance whatsoever, is quite simply the major effect of the [sophist's] critical position in relation to ontology.... The matrix of sophist politics is the *Treatise on Non-Being*.²²

For Cassin it is not a question of trying to grasp whether the sophists were radical or conservative, and thus of where to situate them in terms of the contours of our own political landscape, but more a question, once ontology has been dispossessed of its sovereign pretensions, of grasping the political as such. Her analysis suggests that determinate forms of politics, determinate political regimes or political movements, all imply 'prior' to their prosecution of particular programmes, manifestos, ideals, and so on, a radically performative element, a moment of persuasion, the event of a consensus or agreement on what is to be done. Cassin opposes to Aristotle's decision, with its attendant imposition of a transcendental condition on speaking, an equally transcendental position, which she sees as having been invented by the sophist Antiphon (read via Gorgias): one citizens. There is politics because one citizens. To citizen, with the aim of achieving justice, is not a function of telling the truth, but of the discursive machinations of a logos achieving a consensus. It is well known that for the Ancient Greeks politics was intimately related to consensus: Cassin's analysis tends to suggest that such a consensus has little to do with a meeting of minds (*homonoia*) and far more with resonance in language (*homologia*). In revisiting the Greek conception of consensus, Cassin gives us a very different answer to the question, 'what unity for the city?'²³

The performative conception of the political which Cassin finds through her analysis of Antiphon is, to an extent, already anticipated in the critique of ontology outlined above. Once one has demonstrated that the 'referent' of ontology, being or nature (*phusis*: what presences, according to Heidegger), results from a play of language forgetful of the discursive rules it institutes, then the claim to distinguish truth (the One) from the doxa, or opinion (of the many), becomes difficult to sustain. Plato saw in this what one might call the conservatism of sophistry: its appeal to estab-

lished opinion. Matters are not quite as simple as this, though, for whilst the *Treatise* sanctions the indiscernibility of truth and opinion, the other texts Cassin analyses adopt a more complex position: one of the writings attributed to Antiphon is, for example, called *On Truth*. Very crudely, one might say that non-being is to being in the *Treatise* as law or culture is to truth or nature in *On Truth*, and as likelihood or plausibility is to truth in the *Tetralogies*. The latter results from the former as a consequence of its play, but, in a peculiar twisting, the former presupposes the latter, even if only as impossible. A brief analysis is required.

How does one citizen? Cassin analyses two neologisms: to citizen, and to barbarize, both of which appear in Antiphon's *On Truth*, and which enable us to determine the complex relations of law and nature defining justice – and hence politics – for the sophist. A commonplace about Greek political culture is that it is understood in terms of a respect for the laws of the city. This idea also conditions the common view that a Greek citizen was free in public but a slave in private, by virtue of the binding nature of the laws of the city and the absence of any code protecting individual liberty. Modern 'liberal' democracy would derive its superiority from its legalized ability to protect the individual from tyranny (whether rule of the polis or a *volonté generale*).²⁴ Another, related, commonplace, is that of Greek ethnocentricity: their respect for laws was contrasted with the barbarians, who lived in a state of nature. Cassin's analysis of Antiphon considerably complicates this well-known picture, for a number of reasons. In the first place, *On Truth* offers two definitions of justice: justice is 'to not transgress the prescriptions of the city in which it happens that one citizens',²⁵ but 'it is just to not be unjust towards someone when one hasn't oneself suffered an injustice'.²⁶ The conflict between these two definitions is made evident by the problem of witnessing: what happens if the city calls on you to act as a witness? Clearly a tricky situation.

Cassin reconciles the two definitions by means of what she calls a political calculus in the use of justice: in public (that is to say, where there are witnesses) one observes the law. In private, one is free. Evidently this implies that hypocrisy becomes a political virtue, but more importantly Cassin argues that the two definitions place nature or the truth (*aletheia*, once again) in the secondary position: that one follows nature in private signifies that the truth is the secondary effect of citizenizing, or publicly professing to justice. In any case one can measure the distance which separates

this view of Greek politics from the commonplace perception if we look at ‘to barbarize’. For Antiphon, in place of the common idea about the difference between the Greek and the foreigner ‘we find that we are naturally made to be both barbarian and Greek’.²⁷ The difference lies in the relationship to law: the Greek follows the law of law, regardless of content, whereas to follow the law of nature (taking the law into one’s own hands, seeking private justice) is the manner of the barbarian. In fact, the matter is even more complicated, because for Antiphon, consonant with the earlier political calculus, seeking public justice to stop the violent to and fro of the private vendetta can actually perpetuate the bad infinity of the chain of injustice. A tribunal for war crimes provides no justice, because the law itself offers no guarantee.

So far, ‘to citizen’ would seem to imply taking up a critical, if not a hypocritical, position in relation to the law: justice would seem to be that of singularities which cannot be presented.²⁸ But it is the ‘unpresentable’ nature of these singularities which actually requires judgement in the first place: if the truth were evident, then logos would not be required and judgement would be unnecessary. Antiphon’s *Tetralogies* clarify the situation. A four-headed series of accusation, defence, accusation, defence, the *Tetralogies* institute the law as the result of a discursive performance ruled by the immanent reversibility of arguments submitted to the logic of the ‘likely’ or ‘probable’ (*eikos*). If (accusation) it is likely that you murdered the victim in cold blood because you bore a long-standing and well-known grudge against him, then (defence) it is more likely that knowing how the suspicion would fall on me, not only would I have taken every precaution not to commit the crime, but others would have profited from the situation to commit the crime themselves ... but (accusation) knowing how likely it is that you could argue that others would have profited from the situation to commit the crime, it is still more likely that you would use this as an excuse to commit the crime in the first place. And so on.

The truth is that of facts, actions, and things, but facts, actions, and things, are precisely what it is a matter of establishing.... The last defence of the second of the *Tetralogies* makes it plain: ‘It is on the basis of what is said that the truth of the facts must be examined.’²⁹

To clarify this understanding of the sophist conception of the political, and to explain the peculiar nature of the transcendental status of ‘to citizen’, Cassin suggests an analogy with Kantian typification. The peculiarly secondary position of ‘truth’ or ‘nature’



in Antiphon’s writings is a little like that of nature in the use of pure practical reason: it serves as a model for one’s maxims of action, whilst not actually providing any content, a purely formal ‘as if’: a law of nature serves as the ‘type’ for a law of freedom. Without nature as this ‘type’, Kant suggests, the maxim of one’s action is ‘morally impossible’. Without the incipit of ‘truth’ the sophist machination of consensus is impossible. However, with it, sophistry undoes any hope of stabilizing discourse around some extradiscursive referent (*phusis*, for Heidegger). Perhaps the Lacanian ‘impossible’ could also be invoked, as it is where the to-ing and fro-ing of logos comes unstuck: ‘nature’ ‘truth’ is invoked only to prove impossibly refractory to discourse. It isn’t the law ‘as such’ which is always already there but the performative, transcendental pretension to justice.

So, what unity for the city?³⁰ Cassin’s account of ‘to citizen’ suggests that the unity aimed at is one with no substantial basis but is, rather, a continual, agonistic process. After all, if justice, as the object of law, is the result of a continual negotiation of law, the impossible secondary presupposition of one’s pretensions to it, political virtue can only consist in a constant if paradoxical forcing of the consensus to enunciate singularities outside of the law. Unity will not consist of a substantial agreement over the nature of the good to be aimed at, of the justice of what is

just, but of a persuasion that what is said to be just is so. Our consensus over the just remains a tense one: our words agree or resonate, but in the bracketing off of the PNC, the sense differs. In other words, sophist consensus seeks unity in form only. The words one uses sound the same but work in every possible sense. But the consensus is real. Dissensus would presuppose contradiction. Diodorus Chronos:

No word is ambiguous, no-one says or thinks anything that is ambiguous, and it must not be considered that whoever speaks says anything other than what he thinks he is saying. If when I think one thing you think another, it may be said that my statement is obscure, but one cannot say it is ambiguous. If ambiguity was naturally inherent to a word, whoever uttered it would say two or more things. But no-one can say two or more things if he thinks he is saying one.³¹

Sophistry exploits the linear unfolding of discourse in order to exploit the signifying plurality of language.

Cassin's account of the sophist perception of the political cannot, of course, be prescriptive: it doesn't tell us if or why we should pursue justice, and so does not advocate a particular politics. Although her reading of 'to citizen' implies a certain democratic element to the political, in the sense that all of those who find themselves in the city can citizen,³² sophistry is compatible with more or less oligarchic or aristocratic regimes as much as with democratic ones. However, her account of logology as the transcendental condition of politics still leaves one or two questions hanging over its ethical implications. Is there a good use of language, and what is 'good' from a sophist point of view?

A better use of language?

The continual emphasis which Cassin places on the manner in which sophistry manipulates the logos, through the equivocations characteristic of homonymy in language, leads us towards a performative/aesthetic conception of a 'better' use of language. The problem of homonymy, for Aristotle and the ulterior metaphysical tradition, results from a signifying excess, therefore a conceptual insufficiency: if there were one signified per signifier, there would be no problem. But this isn't the case, and so one is led to an aesthetic perception of language. The consensus which logology produces is an aesthetic one. The preceding section implies that sophistry removes any of the traditional means we would have to disagree, in favour of a procedure effectuated in language, on language. However, the Presocratic status of sophistry means that the

'aesthetic' one has in mind here is one which evades the traditional sensible/intelligible signifier/signified dualism. The latter is a result of our Platonic/Aristotelian heritage.

But why is this 'better', and in what sense? Logology is 'ameliorative', for, as Gorgias states in his *Encomium of Helen*, 'Speech is a powerful lord that with the smallest and most invisible body accomplishes most godlike works. It can banish fear and remove grief and instil pleasure and enhance pity.'³³ Logology thus has parallels with the psychoanalytic account of language as 'talking cure'. And Cassin points out that it isn't only the sophists who were aware of this aspect of their practice of language: Socrates states in a defence of Protagoras, the sophist makes one pass from a less good state to a better one;³⁴ a better which will have been the case not only because it will have been stated, but also because it is in the nature of the consensus it instills to function as a sort of open series without a real point of convergence – a gathering of the multiple without transcendent unity.

Following the thread of these remarks, one might say that for Cassin the 'better' to which sophistry leads is an 'otherwise' and an 'open'; an 'otherwise than being' without transcendence, an opening or an outside (of what the doxa will admit) equally without transcendence – and thus radically different from the apolitical invocation of the open which one can find in Heidegger.³⁵ An 'ex-cendence' perhaps. The sophist's discursive action is linked to the contingency of the *kairos*, the opportune moment: indeed, it is this predicate of contingency implicit in the way that sophistry undoes language which makes its practice political.³⁶ Such action cannot be purely spontaneous or voluntaristic, since the sophist, coming second, must accept the purely existential constraints of the language s/he is given – indeed, so doing is a condition of its successful exploitation. But it can be directed to any manner of nefarious ends. Cassin's work implies that the redirection of consensus to a determinate end presupposes a pure opening, an enunciative event refractory to the identities of signification. In this, she comes close to Laclau and Mouffe: not only a similar attempt to think the political in its (antagonistically) open nature, but also an emphasis on the non-literal, equivocal nature of discourse. The status of ontology in Laclau and Mouffe's work is not clear.³⁷

There is a danger in drawing such parallels that Cassin's conception of logology, her understanding of the sophist effect, will become increasingly indeterminate. However, it is suggestive of the insistence of the logological in contemporary discourse, and of

the importance of thinking more carefully about the relationship of ontology and the political. Besides, Cassin is aware of the problem:

To make logos the necessary condition of politics is, because of the amplitude itself of the sense of logos, to make it such a loose and long thread that it can tie up in the same bunch a good part of Antiquity (for example, a bit of Plato, much of Aristotle, all of sophistry), and a good part of recent modernity (for example, Perelman, Rorty, Apel, Habermas, Arendt, doubtless Heidegger)...³⁸

However, to be aware of the problem does not necessarily mean to address it effectively, and one might ask at what cost this attempt at grasping the political as such is made. There are two main points to be made here. The first is methodological. Whilst the historical/historiographical framework Cassin adopts allows her to problematize the relationship of philosophy and sophistry in a hitherto unforeseen and radically novel fashion, her insistence on sticking to the limits of her corpus obviates the need for her to be drawn into discussions which fall outside of its focus, whilst not precluding her from making statements which have a far broader ambit. Thus, it is only in the translation of her arguments beyond a philological debate that questions start to impose themselves. It is her *de facto* adherence to a hermeneutic problem of origins (nevertheless radically questioned from within) which permits her to argue for the radical negativity of the political vis-à-vis philosophy. As readers of these pages know only too well, much work has been done in recent years on rethinking the political in a manner which questions the equation philosophy = ontology = metaphysics. It is true that Cassin differentiates ontology and politics in a way that philosophers of a Heideggerian bent do not, and introduces an alternative manner of looking at the former's implication in politics. Yet one might wonder about the degree to which her arguments differ in their ultimate implications from those of, say, Agamben or Lacoue-Labarthe. Less of the pathos about the end of this, the retreating of that, perhaps, but the conservatism of the hermeneutic problematic still makes itself felt.

A second point concerns the 'signifying' autonomy accorded to logos in her conception of logology. By making logos the condition of the political one is precluded from addressing what Balibar has called the heteronomy of the conditions of the political.³⁹ To be sure, the logos which Cassin has in mind is more like Foucauldian discourse than anything else: it has no interiority, and must be grasped in terms of its pure existence, the factum of language. But the

sufficiency of language would require us to think the non-discursive through language. And there is perhaps something conservative about thinking that the possible must be always already discerned by language. Foucault began to insist on the non-discursive as a corrective to the theoretical sufficiency of discourse. In a sense, the direction is there in Cassin's work already. Logology gives us both more and less than a language. By abolishing any unequivocal distinction between signifier and signified, sophistry institutes a physics of discourse – speech as a series of sonic events in the physical universe.⁴⁰

However, Cassin's problematic precludes the development of this notion. One might perhaps look towards the Foucauldian concept of the *dispositif* or Deleuze and Guattari's conception of the 'assemblage of enunciation', which grasps speech events in a more radically inclusive framework, as a way of looking at the machinations of discourse (partially) constitutive of the political. However, this would undercut the historian of philosophy's ability to make broad interpretative statements and would require a kind of philosophical empiricism which has the courage to forget about ontology. Nothing precludes Cassin's work from developing differently in the future. As it stands, it makes an excellent case for thinking both the past and the political otherwise.

Notes

1. Agamben, Badiou, Balibar, Derrida, Laclau, Mouffe, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, Negri, Rancière, Schurmann, to name but a few, See, for example, the 'Thinking the Political' series edited by Simon Critchley and Keith Ansell-Pearson for Routledge.
2. The following article concentrates largely on *L'effet sophistique*, Gallimard, Paris, 1995, which builds on Cassin's doctoral thesis, itself published as *Si Parménide*, Presse Universitaire de Lille, Lille, 1980. Besides these two texts, Cassin has also published a new translation of Parmenides' famous poem, essays on Hannah Arendt, as well as a translation of, and critical essay (with Michel Nancy) on, Book Gamma of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. She is currently a director of research at the CNRS and edits a series with Alain Badiou for Seuil.
3. As she suggests, in *L'effet sophistique* 'sophistry forces us to have it out with the Heideggerian conception of logos and perhaps of language'. *L'effet sophistique*, p. 12.
4. Bear in mind here the quasi-homonymy between 'fact' and 'effect' (*fait* and *effet*) in French.
5. Thus Cassin is careful to pick out the philosophical decisions which animate the doxography on the sophists.
6. It will be recalled that part of Heidegger's interest in Kant, at least if his *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* is anything to go by, lies in the latter's renewal of the Parmenidean problematic: the 'at the same time' in 'the conditions of the possibility of experience in general are, at the same time, the conditions of the possibility of objects of experience' offer, for Heidegger, evidence

- for 'the essential unity of the complete structure of transcendence' – that is, the unity of thinking and being.
7. Jean Beaufret, *Parmenide Le poème* PUF, Paris, 1955, p. 43.
 8. Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Mathematicians*, VII 66. Cassin points out that Heidegger draws on this version of Gorgias for his understanding of sophistry. (See Martin Heidegger, *GA 21, Logik*, Klosterman, Frankfurt am Main, 1995.) It enables him to paint them as 'inauthentic' because they would have occluded Being.
 9. The elision of the difference between sophistry and scepticism is evident also in Husserl's *Formal and Transcendental Logic*.
 10. Cassin *L'effet sophistique*, p. 26.
 11. This is explicit in Beaufret. It is Jonathan Barnes who translates the two ways as those of Truth and Opinion, but curiously, Barnes, like Heidegger, sees a link with Kant: Parmenides inaugurates a revolution in critical rationality.
 12. The writings of Freud and Lacan on the unconscious bear, for Cassin, distinct traces of the sophist effect. See *L'effet sophistique*, pp. 386–408.
 13. That it does so by applying the logic of non-contradiction is not an objection to what follows. In this instance the application of the logic follows the movement designated by Deleuze as that of *humour*. See Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, Athlone, London, 1990.
 14. Proclus, *Commentary on the Timaeus*, I 345 11–27; cited in J. Barnes, *Early Greek Philosophy*, Penguin, London, 1997, p. 132.
 15. This translation is a bastardization of J. Mansfield and Cassin, both in *L'effet sophistique*, pp. 124–5.
 16. Pseudo-Aristotle, *On Melissus, Xenophanes, and Gorgias*, 980a 9; in *L'effet sophistique*, p. 131.
 17. A point Nietzsche made: 'the frontier between good and evil disappears – that is sophistry'. Cited in Cassin, *L'effet sophistique*, p. 17.
 18. A complex situation. Sophistry is not simply rhetoric because *Phaedrus* praises rhetoric (= philosophy). *Gorgias* dismisses rhetoric as a whole (= sophistry), but also distinguishes a good rhetoric and a bad one, perhaps suggesting its axiological neutrality. But what would an axiological neutral rhetoric (i.e. not sophistry, not philosophy) be? As Cassin says 'With Plato one witnesses both the invention and the vanishing of rhetoric.' *L'effet sophistique*, p. 414.
 19. Aristotle's demonstration by refutation of the PNC is puzzling because, in so far as the latter forms the principle of principles for Aristotle, it should be possessed of a self-evidence rendering its demonstration nugatory, not to mention inconsistent. From a Heideggerian perspective, the endeavour testifies to a shift in the nature of truth (*apohansis* rather than unveiling), and thus to a forgetting of Being. For a logician, on the other hand, it simply shows the incoherence of a logic of terms. See B. Cassin and M. Narcy, *La décision du sens*, Vrin, Paris, 1989. See also Terence Irwin, *Aristotle's First Principles*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1988, and the exchange between Cassin and Irwin in B. Cassin, ed., *Nos grecs et leurs modernes*, Seuil, Paris, 1992.
 20. Cf. J.-J. Lecercle, *The Violence of Language*, Routledge, London, 1990. By a curious coincidence, Deleuze and Guattari's conception of rhizome 'counter' confirms Aristotle.
 21. Cassin suggests that the *Sophist Refutations* can be understood entirely in terms of the problem of homonymy. Also key aspects of Kant's approach to the illusions of reason in his first *Critique* can be grasped in these terms. On homonymy, see J.C. Milner, *Les noms indistincts*, Seuil, Paris, 1983, an account of homonymy marred only by its excessively Lacanian aspect.
 22. *L'effet sophistique*, p. 152.
 23. Different from Plato (strictly hierarchical unity), Aristotle (moderate pluralism, itself, she argues, influenced by sophistry), Arendt (her conception of the primacy of the political equally influenced by sophistry), Heidegger (ultimately Platonic – that is, non-political).
 24. Berlin's 'negative liberty'. See Q. Skinner 'The Idea of Negative Liberty', in Richard Rorty et al., eds, *Philosophy in History*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1984.
 25. Cited in Cassin, *L'effet sophistique*, p. 275.
 26. Cited in *ibid.*, p. 276.
 27. Cited in *ibid.*, p. 275.
 28. In some respects, Cassin's inspiration here is Lyotard's *The Differend*.
 29. Cited in *L'effet sophistique*, p. 174.
 30. Better still: What unity for what city? Cassin's analysis of chrematistics also suggests that sophistry is a factor in deterritorializing politics beyond the autarkic walls of the city. See 'Logos, Khremata, Temporalité', in *L'effet sophistique*, and 'The Accident of Time', in Eric Alliez, *Capital Times*, Minnesota University Press, Minneapolis, 1996.
 31. Cassin, *L'effet sophistique*, p. 372.
 32. *Ibid.*
 33. Gorgias, 'Encomium of Helen', in Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, trans. G.A. Kennedy, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1991.
 34. *Theaetetus*, 116d, 167d; *L'effet sophistique*, p. 111. In this sense sophist logology is not unlike the psychoanalytic talking cure and Deleuze and Guattari's *Rhizome*, one principle of which is that everything can and must be connected to everything else.
 35. For more on this, see Michel Haar, *The Song of the Earth*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1983.
 36. Political science would perhaps abolish such contingency by circumscribing it in a previously defined field of possibilities. The sophist *kairos* with its opportune moment offers some interesting analogies with Machiavelli's *Prince*, seeking continuously to reinforce his power. Suggestive in this regard is Clement Rosset, *L'anti-nature*, PUF, Paris, 1970.
 37. Mouffe: 'the political cannot be restricted to a certain type of institution, or envisaged as constituting a specific sphere or level of society. It must be conceived as a dimension that is inherent to every human society and that determines our very ontological condition.' Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, Verso, London, 1993, p. 3, my stress.
 38. Cassin, *L'effet sophistique*, p. 236.
 39. Étienne Balibar, 'Trois concepts de la politique', in *La crainte des masses*, Galilée, Paris, 1995.
 40. See the discussion 'Physique du discours/discours de la physique' in her *Si Parmenide*.